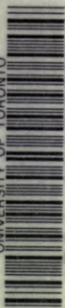


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Jan Gossaert (Mabuse) The
adoration of the kings

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IN GOSSAERT (MAB)

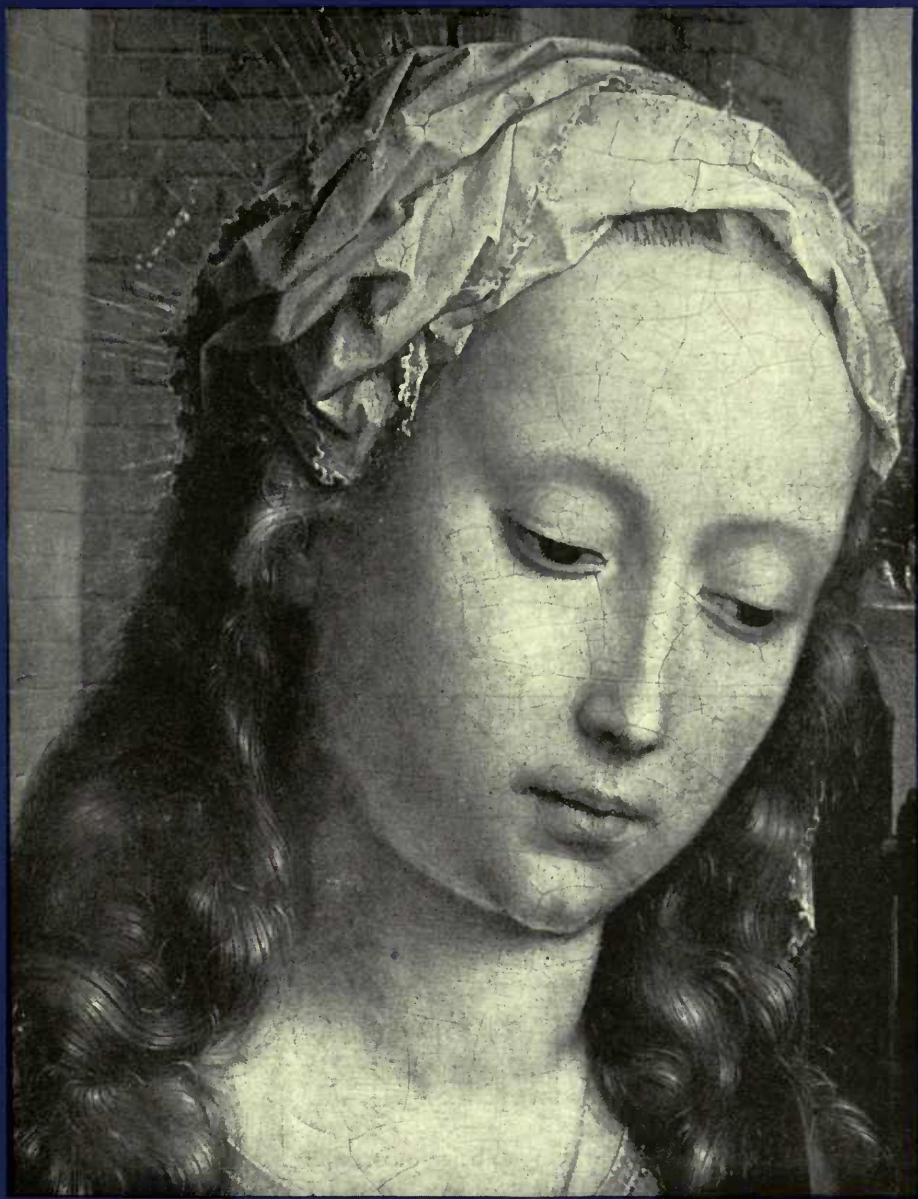
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ADORATION OF THE KING

BOOKS

NUMBER

JAN GOSSAERT (MABUSE)



THE ADORATION OF THE KINGS

WITH 19 ILLUSTRATIONS AND AN INTRODUCTION BY MAX J. FRIEDLANDER

GALLERY BOOKS

NUMBER 19

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RUBENS/CHATEAU DE STEEN

... a process of interest and delight to the general art lover as well as to experts and students. Appreciation and understanding are helped.—*Yorkshire Post*.

JAN GOSSAERT (MABUSE)
THE ADORATION OF
THE KINGS

IN THE NATIONAL GALLERY · LONDON

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

MAX J. FRIEDLÄNDER

Translated from the German by Cecil Gould

AND NINETEEN ILLUSTRATIONS



THE GALLERY BOOKS No. 19

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1 *The Adoration of the Kings*
Panel: 69 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 63 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches

National Gallery
London

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JAN GOSSAERT (*MABUSE*):
THE ADORATION OF THE KINGS
by MAX J. FRIEDLÄNDER

IN the year 1911 the National Gallery acquired Gossaert's *Adoration of the Kings* from the collection of the Countess of Carlisle. Even before that time the picture had been widely recognised as being of exceptional importance and calculated to change the conventional view of Gossaert, though few art lovers had seen it.

This magnificent, almost square panel ($69\frac{3}{4} \times 63\frac{1}{2}$ in.) bears concealed signatures—Jenni Gossaert—in two places, and is of distinguished *provenance*. Painted for the abbey of St. Adrian at Grammont, it was acquired by the Archduke Albert in 1601 for 2000 fl., and installed in 1603 in the palace chapel at Brussels. In the eighteenth century it became the property of the Duke of Orleans and after the French Revolution passed to the possession of Lord Carlisle, remaining at Castle Howard and at Naworth Castle, near Carlisle, until it entered the National Gallery. The picture has thus repeatedly attracted the attention of high-placed personages, just as Gossaert himself enjoyed abundant court favour in his lifetime.

Jan, or, as he liked to call himself, Jennin, Gossaert was born at Maubeuge in Hainault, probably in the year 1478. In 1503 he was entered as independent master in the Guild register of Antwerp under the name "Jennyn van Henne-gouwe". He was at that time about twenty-five years old. He remained at Antwerp until 1507 and is recorded as taking pupils in 1505 and 1507.

Of Gossaert's apprentice years one can only speak hypothetically as a result of stylistic analysis of his works. He may have been active in Bruges before the attraction of the prosperous harbour town of Antwerp induced him to settle there, as it did so many others from all parts of the Netherlands.

At an early stage Gossaert entered into relations with the illegitimate members of the House of Burgundy, first of all with Philip of Burgundy, the rich and open-handed art lover and admirer of the antique. It was the latter who took him to Rome in 1508. The humanist, Noviomagus, writing of Philip in 1509,

says:—"Nihil magis eum Romæ delectabat quam sacra illa vetustatis monumenta, quæ per clarissimum pictorem Joannem Gossardum Malbodium depingenda sibi curavit." We know at least one drawing (in Venice) made by Gossaert after an antique statue in Rome.

On his return the Master changed his abode many times, his commissions calling him hither and thither, mainly in the service of princely patrons. Apart from Philip he was employed by Maximilian of Burgundy, the Marquis de Vère, the exiled King Christian of Denmark and the Vicereine Margarete. He stayed for a long time at Utrecht and at Middelburg.

Gossaert's historical position has long been interpreted by writers in terms of his relation to Italy and to the Renaissance. Guicciardini praises him in 1560 in the following words:—"Il quale fu il primo che portò d'Italia in questi paesi, l'arte del dipingere Historie, e poesie con figure nude." Van Mander and Vasari express themselves in similar terms. In order to get the full force of this verdict we must have a clear idea of the attitude of the Italians of the High Renaissance. To them Netherlandish religious art of the fifteenth century was barbaric, and Gossaert, who broke free from it, the pioneer of a modern, universally-valid art, freed from mediæval chains.

It was in the nature of things that the verdict on Gossaert's mission changed with the growing appreciation of the merit of early Netherlandish painting, in consequence of which the pioneer was sometimes regarded as a false prophet and a traitor.

When, therefore, art lovers and art historians were enabled to study the *Adoration of the Kings* at their leisure in the National Gallery, they found that what Guicciardini had said was not justified, still less what was to be read in more recent literature concerning Gossaert's momentous destiny. Neither his claim to fame nor the verdict seemed legitimate, since no evidence was readily apparent either of the positive factor of his Italianising tendencies or of the negative one of his decisive break with native tradition. The facile assumption was therefore made that the picture was one of Gossaert's early works, painted in Antwerp before 1508 and before his conversion, and in this connection the erroneous interpretation of some marks on the picture as a date—1507—was opportune. But Gossaert was already twenty-nine years old in 1507 so that the Epiphany, even if it were painted in that year, could not be classed as an early work in the strict sense of the term. In addition to this, drawings and paintings have been known for some time which can be termed early works of the Master with more justification than the *Adoration of the Kings*. Starting with a drawing of the Holy Family at Copenhagen (Fig. 2), a sheet signed with the Master's name,



2 *The Holy Family*, by GOSSAERT
Drawing

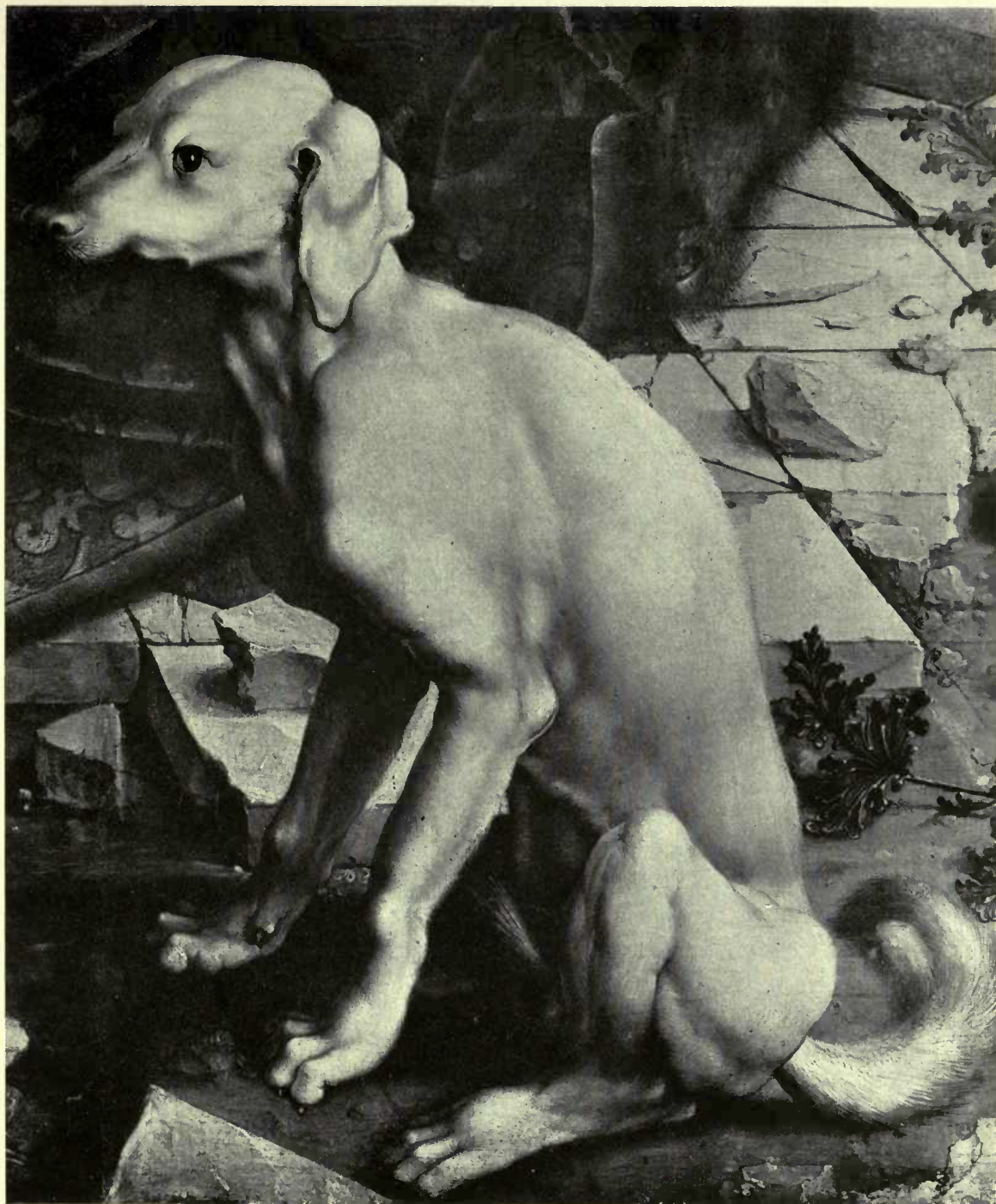
Print Room
Copenhagen



3 Detail of Dürer's *St. Eustace* Engraving

it has been possible on stylistic evidence to point to other drawings as well as several paintings as belonging to the same phase in his development. With figures pointlessly and jerkily animated, fluttering draperies and affected gestures, Gossaert emerges in these works as a member of the group of so-called Antwerp Mannerists—he was probably for a short time (about 1505) at the head of that movement. Compared, for instance, with the less solemn triptych at Lisbon, our Epiphany, with its grandeur, maturity, solidity and even monumentality, gives the impression of being a later work, which in fact can hardly be doubted.

In the National Gallery picture, Mary sits with the Child, not in a humble cottage, but in front of a ruined palace. In one hand she holds the golden chalice offered by the oldest King, who is shown kneeling. To right and left are seen the two younger Kings, with their attendants close beside them. Angels are flying overhead. The Epiphany was the favourite subject in the Netherlands at the beginning of the sixteenth century, so that the presence of many other pictures available for comparison makes it easier for us to isolate the particular and personal qualities of the achievement in this case. The design as a whole is firmly anchored by the vertical and parallel architectural forms, and the figures, who are themselves upright like pillars, are brought into



4 Detail of *The Adoration of the Kings*, by GOSSAERT

harmony with the towering buildings. The courtly splendour of the costumes and of the decorative details is executed with the utmost care. Oblique lighting increases the effect of cubic, spatial and textural elements. The characters behave towards the Mother of God with worldly confidence and self-assurance rather than with piety. The whole represents a condition rather than an event and is ceremonious rather than spiritual. It arouses astonishment for the mastery with which the large picture space has been completely filled with richness of form. In the types of the Madonna and the Christ Child the Master adheres to Flemish tradition (Figs. 8 and 9), particularly to Gérard David, while the delicate solidity of handling seems worthy of Jan Van Eyck. The dogs in the foreground, which appear naturalistic, are in fact derived from German engravings—one from Dürer's *St. Eustace* (Figs. 3 and 4), and the other from Schongauer's *Adoration of the Kings* (Fig. 7).

If, despite obvious ties with native tradition, certain things in the picture appeal to us as being modern and personal, the cause lies in the vigorous secularisation of the sacred theme and also in the revelation of stupendous skill which is no longer merely a means to an end but is rather a triumph of assurance in itself.

The so-called *Malvagna triptych* at Palermo (Fig. 5) is related stylistically to the *Adoration of the Kings* and dates from about the same time. The Madonna is in the middle with music-making angels: on each side of her is a female saint and on the outside of the wings Adam and Eve in Paradise. This small altar-piece enjoyed remarkable popularity. The design of the central panel was repeatedly borrowed. The types of the Madonna, of the Child, and of the folds of the drapery are not unlike those of the Epiphany. The over-ornate, late Gothic throne is depicted with knowledge and enthusiasm. It is hard to believe that Gossaert could have been keenly and energetically engaged on this small-scale decorative work after he had studied and drawn antique architecture in Rome. Nevertheless there is a strong argument for believing that the Malvagna altar-piece dates from after 1508—that is, after the Italian journey. The group of Adam and Eve is a fairly free derivation (and facing in the opposite direction) from a woodcut by Dürer in the Little Passion. One plate in this series of woodcuts, which was published in 1511, is dated 1509. Even if we assume a lost drawing by Dürer as a connecting link it remains unlikely that Gossaert would have had access to this German design before 1508. It is not without astonishment that we notice that in pictures which demonstrably date in essentials from later than 1508, Gossaert did not scruple to combine Gothic decoration and Renaissance architecture—as, for example, in the Prague panel of *St. Luke*. He



5 The *Malvagna triptych*, by GOSSAERT
Central panel

Museo Nazionale
Palermo

long retained his preference for Gothic fountains like towers, standing in the open air.

The immediate change of style which one might have expected as a result of his experiences in Rome did not take place. When Rome is mentioned, however, we think primarily of Raphael and Michelangelo. But what would Gossaert have seen there in 1508 in fact? The ruins of antiquity, but very little Italian painting. The art of the *quattrocento*, which had only penetrated to Rome to a limited extent, would have made small impression on him. Raphael, who was five years younger than he, and Michelangelo, who was a few years older, had, by 1508, not yet established their position (at least in Rome) as the outstanding and decisive personalities.

Gossaert was affected in Italy by the spirit of the Renaissance, but did not turn to the southern forms which he could have seen and made use of. In no case did he copy Italian compositions or motives, as Van Orley did, and even Quentin Matsys. It was not that he avoided imitation out of proud self-assurance, since he turned more than once to Jan Van Eyck and to Dürer. Southern forms were more readily accessible to him in Dürer's German translation than in the original.

Gossaert was regarded by his contemporaries, particularly by his princely patrons, as a free and audacious spirit and as an "artist" in the modern sense of the term. He himself came to live up to this role more and more. When we survey his *œuvre* we see that his path runs parallel with that of the Italian Renaissance, but does not cross it.

Gossaert's forms swell, and become more rounded and heavier. He moves further and further away from the leanness and angularity of Gothic. The human body becomes for him the only worthwhile objective. The landscape element diminishes in importance. His figures fit into the picture space as into a prison, and indeed their setting is often so tight that they are obliged to stoop. The Master excels at movement, concealment and foreshortening of limbs. He seeks out difficulties in order to display his mastery. He becomes more and more a formalist, incapable of narrating and of immersing himself in the spiritual side of the subject.

Guicciardini praises Gossaert's profane pictures which contain naked figures. Certain of his pictures survive which show pagan gods and mythological scenes, but they are not among his happiest productions. He can never have enough far-fetched and daring attitudes. The narrative becomes incomprehensible and the acrobatics sometimes laughable.

When Dürer stood before Gossaert's tremendous altar-piece at Middelburg



6 *A Man and his Wife*, by GOSSAERT
On vellum, 18 × 26½ inches

National Gallery
London

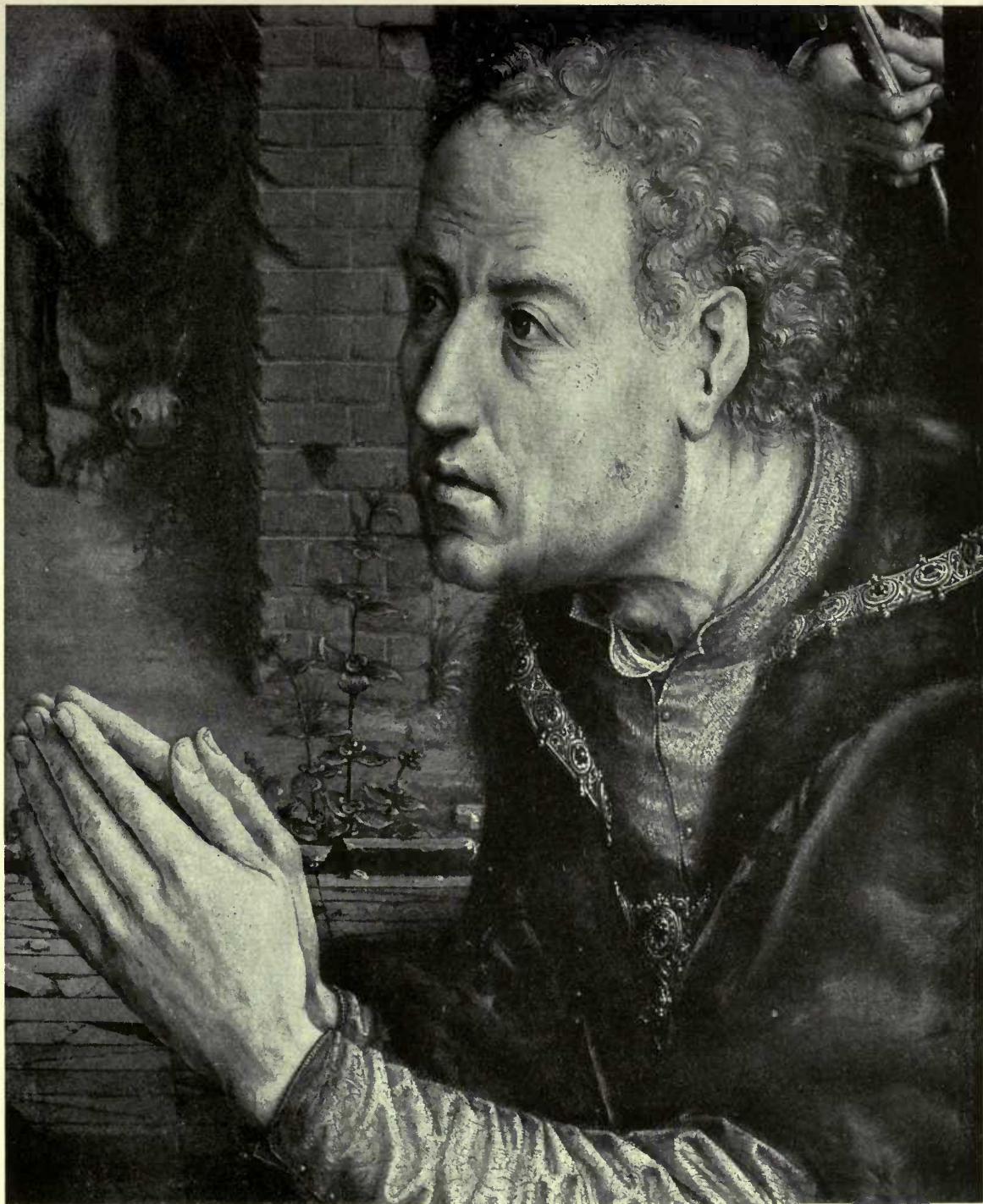
he wrote a critical opinion of it in his diary in the following words:—"Not so good in its main lines as in the painting." We are probably interpreting this sentence correctly if we assume that Dürer was impressed by the execution from a technical point of view but that he was not satisfied with the invention, composition and expressive qualities.

In addition to the Epiphany, the National Gallery possesses five portraits by Gossaert which are calculated to justify his reputation. Even in the *Adoration of the Kings* one is struck by some highly individual heads which look like portraits.

As a portrait-painter Gossaert was able to reconcile the Netherlandish virtues of conscientious technique and objective observation with southern grandeur. And his worldly spirit was no impediment in this *genre*, particularly as he usually had to portray forceful men and women with both feet firmly on the ground. The double portrait of the married couple seems to me extremely impressive: the old man, determined not to let himself be ousted from his commanding position looks at us aggressively, while his wife appears hardly less overbearing (Fig. 6).



9 Detail of *The Adoration of the Kings*



10 Detail of *The Adoration of the Kings*



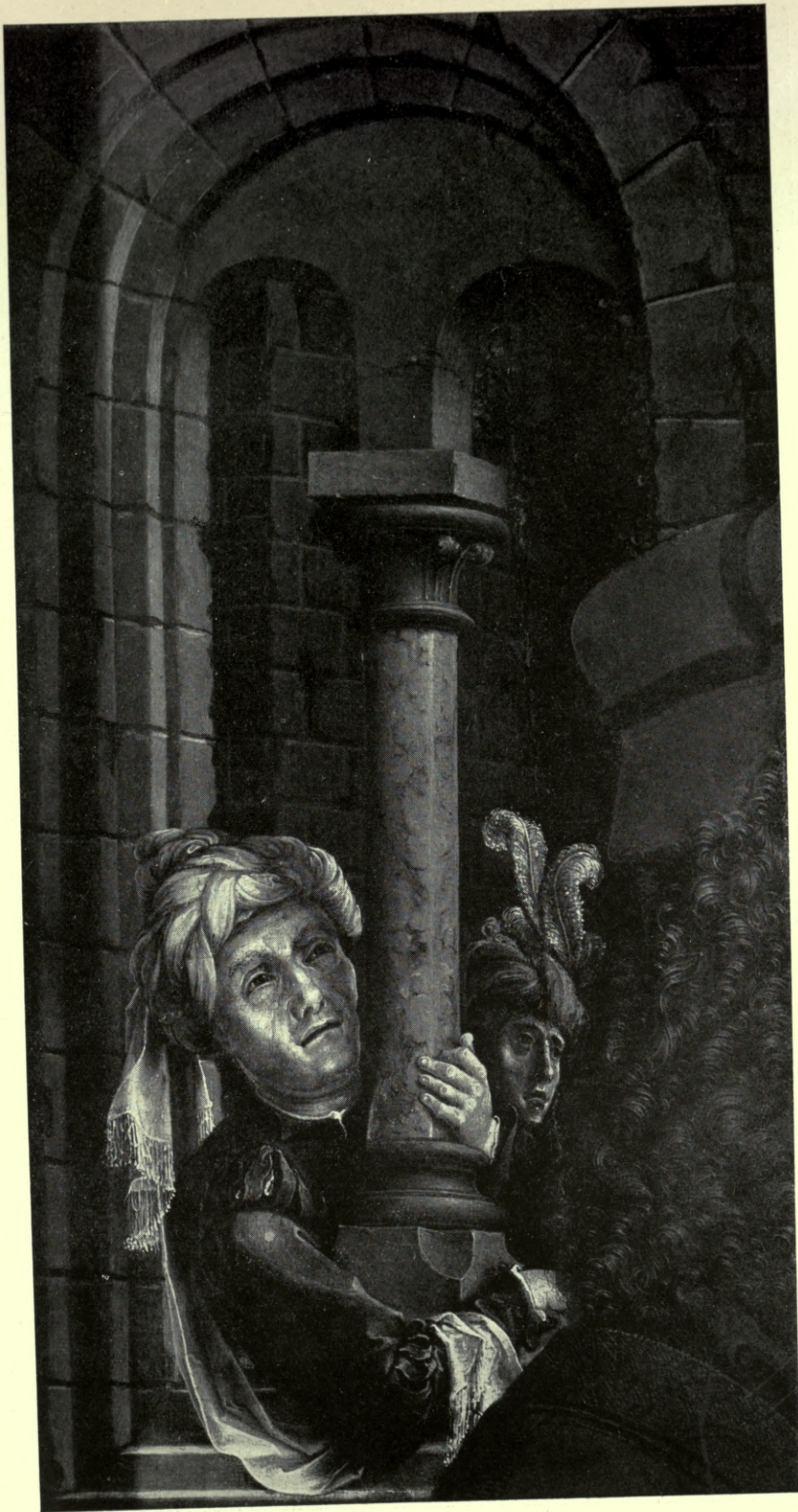
11 Detail of *The Adoration of the Kings*



12 Detail of *The Adoration of the Kings*



13 Detail of *The Adoration of the Kings*



14 Detail of *The Adoration of the Kings*



15 Detail of *The Adoration of the Kings*



16 Detail of *The Adoration of the Kings*



17 Detail of *The Adoration of the Kings*



18 Detail of *The Adoration of the Kings*



19 Detail of *The Adoration of the Kings*

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